

Review of *Magical Habits* by Monica Huerta (Duke University Press)

by [Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez](#) | [Issue 11.2 \(Fall 2022\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

ABSTRACT In *Magical Habits*, Monica Huerta delivers a labyrinthine and whimsical study on the intersection between stories, race, place, and archive. The author's lived experience as a second-generation Mexican immigrant living in Chicago is dissected to bring about an original understanding of how race complicates notions of history, capitalism, and narratives of the self. The reader's curiosity will be piqued by *Magical Habits'* experimental structure, and by the author's decision to abandon traditional academic writing in favor of an intimate prose that fluctuates between storytelling and critical thinking.

KEYWORDS [critical race theory](#), [literature](#), [Chicanx studies](#)

Magical Habits. By Monica Huerta. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2021, 191 pp. (ebook) ISBN 9781478021483.

Monica Huerta's intricate and deeply intimate *Magical Habits* takes the reader on an inventive study of the links between stories, race, place, and archive. Huerta's fabulation of her experience growing up as a second generation Mexican immigrant in Chicago, as well as her academic endeavors as a researcher and professor, bring about a provocative understanding of how race impacts space, history, and capitalism. *Magical Habits'* architecture is itself an experiment in archival exploration. Huerta challenges the reader to abandon traditional academic writing's framework to embrace her prose, which jumps skillfully from storytelling to cultural and critical thinking. As such, the style itself becomes part of the author's demonstration. Huerta and the press play with layout and fonts actively disturb reader's expectations, challenging the hegemony of such styles in academia.

Following a long established tradition in Chicanx thinking, Huerta employs autoethnography and fiction to produce knowledge. The book is divided into twelve sections, some of which include subsections, titled with year numbers, that are in appearance isolated fragments but could be read as a parallel story of the narrator's life. The book covers not only her lived experience, it also draws from her grandparents' and parents' travels and words. Rather than a narrative of the author's thought process, the text presents objects and

documents (photographs, restaurant menus, imagined dialogues, radio transcripts, personal emails, internet reviews, and even social media screenshots and messages) that come alive through small details, such as the images on the menus from her parent's restaurant, that take on historical significance. As such, a linear account of the book would not do justice to its innovative structure.

Descriptions of places threaded throughout the book help the reader navigate Huerta's train of thought. It becomes the site where the very idea of meaning is challenged. In section 6, "whether wisdom," Huerta invites the reader to her childhood home, and in section 8, "when courts of love have cash registers," she recounts her and her family's moves and how they adapted to their new surroundings. These personal sections which border on memoir writing enact the more abstract observations from other sections, bringing them back to concrete phenomena. Section 9, "auctions," offers up the retelling of the transformation of a Chinese restaurant into a Mexican one, exploring how the process of migrating under capitalism is much more than a change in place.

The preface, section 3, "disciplines and disciples," and the final section 12, "choreography," are explorations of how habits of thought become habits of living that perpetuate settler-capitalistic habits of life and how they can be rendered inoperative through storytelling that subverts said turns of thought. Section 10 touches on the transformative powers of language, promoting ambivalence as a possible site of self-knowledge. Section 11, "after hypervigilance," addresses the discomfort produced by language amongst immigrants and their children, and the final section also points to forgetting as one of the dangers of not facing that discomfort.

Huerta's approach to language establishes a relationship between identity and politics, and elicits a rethinking of viewpoint in academia, contributing to the debate on situated knowledge already at the forefront of feminist critical thinking. In section 5, "heartbreak as praxis," Huerta posits that a way of knowing (here, that of immigrants) can be learned by those not affected, and she fosters empathy through a writing style that is not descriptive but performative. This is also the case in her analysis of aphorisms in section 4 and the subsection, "the Quene. A Mervilos and Magiquall Tale of epistemological Mischief, Wherein there are revealed no secretes," a parodic fairy tale through which the author recounts the struggle of producing knowledge in rigid academic structures.

Sections 1, "the synthesis problem," and 2, "fabulations," rethink the "I" as a question asked to history, to nostalgia, and to archival practices. Huerta questions the hierarchies established between recognized history and histories by highlighting the importance of everyday life in analyzing capitalism and postcoloniality, as opposed to big political turns in legislation that affect the Latinx community. She reviews her grandfather's involvement in the Cristero rebellion in Mexico as well as her parents' participation in the wave of

immigration from Mexico to the United States—more specifically to Chicago—and how these newcomers transformed the landscape of the city. Section 7, “BEFORE AND AFTER,” delves deeper into this idea, revealing how the emergence of Taco Bell had an impact both in her life and for Latino communities and restaurant owners. Her personal accounts are intermingled with other scholars’ work on the bracero program, to provide further context.

Ultimately, the strength of Huerta’s work lies more in her innovative approach to methodology and the acquisition knowledge than in the facts related. This book will definitely benefit students and researchers in the fields of feminism and gender studies, critical race theory, Chicana studies, and Latinx literature. It could also enlighten students wishing for more creative liberty in academia, as it clearly demonstrates the the political implications of academic writing, the hierarchies hidden behind the text, and how to deconstruct them. This book would thus benefit any young person searching for their voice in research in the aforementioned fields.

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Anaïs Ornelas Ramirez is a PhD candidate at Sorbonne Université Faculté des Lettres. Her writing and research is broadly concerned with Mexican media, gender, and the affectivity of violence. Her PhD thesis deals with narcotelenovela's gendered order and the political implications of melodrama. She is the recipient of the 2022–2023 Fulbright-García Robles scholarship.

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